DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 264 163 SO 016 946

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TITLE Peace and Nuclear War. ERIC Digest No. 21.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Boulder, Colo.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Nov 85
CONTRACT 400-83-0012
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Controversial Issues (Course Content); Disarmament; Educational Needs; Elementary Secondary Education; Guidelines; *Nuclear Warfare; *Peace; Public Education; Social Studies; War
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest examines the nature of peace and nuclear war education, rationales for its inclusion in public school programs, and ways to deal with the controversial nature of the topics. A distinction between peace education and nuclear war education is followed by a description of four basic themes offered as a rationale for peace and nuclear war education: peace and nuclear war education are appropriate content for developing capable, thinking, competent young adults; peace and nuclear war-related content are highly relevant in today's world; openly addressing and confronting psychological concerns of young people regarding nuclear war with information and appropriate pedagogy can help young people cope with these concerns; and by addressing peace and nuclear issues, teachers can prepare young adults for participation in the nation's democratic institutions by helping them make decisions regarding leaders and policy. Challenges for dealing with the controversial nature of peace and nuclear war education include (1) those teaching peace and nuclear war education must familiarize themselves with both the content and processes necessary for credibly teaching this information and must take great care in selecting only age-appropriate lessons; (2) the controversial nature of peace and nuclear war education must be recognized, confronted, and honestly addressed; and (3) advocates of peace and nuclear war education need to work diligently, patiently, and cooperatively in bringing about the changes they seek. A list of 15 related resources concludes the digest. (LH)

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ED264163

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ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education

Boulder, Colorado

November 1985

SO 016 946

ERIC

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ERIC Digest No. 21
November 1985

PEACE AND NUCLEAR WAR

by John Zola and Jaye Zola

The increasing concern in the United States about nuclear weapons is paralleled by the interest of educators in providing peace and nuclear war education in the public schools. Numerous school districts, both small and large, are adopting specific resolutions mandating the inclusion of peace- and nuclear-war-related content in the K-12 program. As with any educational change movement, there is also a measure of controversy, in this case focused upon the appropriateness of teaching these topics in the public schools and whether such topics can be addressed in a non-biased and non-politicized fashion. This ERIC Digest examines the nature of peace and nuclear war education, rationales for its inclusion in the public school program, and ways to deal with the controversial nature of the topics.

What is peace and nuclear war education?

Nuclear war education focuses on content beginning with the Manhattan Project and the first testing of a successful nuclear weapon. Included in a nuclear war unit would be such topics as the workings of nuclear weapons, historical information on the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan, national security decision making since World War II, current developments in weapons technology, and efforts to achieve arms control. Higher order thinking skills are emphasized in nuclear war education, including interpretation of data (rather than simple recall), inquiry, synthesis, and evaluation. The issues related to nuclear war and weapons are too weighty to allow students to avoid in-depth investigation and careful thought.

Peace education is a broader field than nuclear war education. It also includes content such as the role of violence and aggression in human cultures; the nature of conflict and means of conflict resolution; obstacles to peaceful resolution of conflicts on personal, interpersonal, and international levels; the history of social change; the history and role of warfare; and peacemakers throughout history. Not exhaustive, this list illustrates the broad scope of a peace education program. Inherent in the study of peace is the formulation of a definition of the term "peace." Problem solving, conflict resolution, and other integrative skills are developed in a peace education program.

Additionally, peace education focuses on broadening students' understanding of opposing viewpoints. This is not for the purpose of countering those viewpoints; rather, it is to help students see the validity of opposing viewpoints and work to find an appropriate middle ground where mutual understanding can lead to new solutions to the issues at hand. Thus, the elimination of polarized thinking is an important goal of peace education.

Why teach peace and nuclear war education in public schools?

Any content area must work from a basic rationale if it is to have a place in the school curriculum. A rationale serves as a justification to the community for the teaching of a certain content or skill area. Peace and nuclear war education must have a clear rationale if they are to be accepted into the school program.

A credible rationale for peace and nuclear war education contains four basic themes. These are:

1. The general goals of education in American society that speak to the development of capable, thinking, competent young adults. Peace and nuclear war education are appropriate content for developing these abilities in students.
2. The relevancy of peace- and nuclear-war-related content in today's world. Nuclear weapons and national-security-related issues are of paramount interest to our society and to young people. No transient topic, peace and nuclear war form a core content that all citizens must understand. One place to begin that process is in the public schools.
3. The psychological concerns expressed in interviews with young people regarding nuclear war and hopes for the future. It appears that nuclear weapons and the threat of nuclear war hang like shadows over the young people of this nation. Openly addressing and confronting these fears with information and appropriate pedagogy can help young people cope with these most natural concerns.
4. The preparation of young adults for participation in this nation's democratic institutions. Since the founding of the United States, the importance of an informed electorate has been the cornerstone of participatory democracy. Peace and nuclear war are issues that citizens must be competent to address as they make decisions in the choice of leaders and policy.

Overall, peace and nuclear war education seeks to transmit information on key issues of the day, develop skills and values for civic involvement, encourage a sense of global interdependence, and promote the notion that even problems of this magnitude can be successfully addressed by informed and concerned individuals.

What about the controversial nature of peace and nuclear war education?

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of teaching peace and nuclear war education is the controversial nature of the topics. Society seems to agree that nuclear war is to be avoided, but there is no such agreement on the means to achieve this goal. Therein lies the controversy for peace and nuclear war educators.

Problems for teachers include: how to reconcile one's own political beliefs with the content to be addressed, finding non-biased materials, and potential reactions from parents and community members. In addition, the political environment now appears to encourage the avoidance of controversial issues in general in school, so extra caution is required to appropriately teach about peace and nuclear war. This being said, educators are nearly unanimous in the sentiment that schools must help students learn how to confront controversial issues in a thoughtful manner.

Basic guidelines for teaching about controversial issues are reflective of guidelines for all good education. The topic

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and material must be age-appropriate and appropriate for inclusion in the particular discipline. In the area of peace and nuclear war education, age appropriateness cannot be over-emphasized. These are topics that are filled with frightening information and it is not the place of the school to scare students. Teachers must take care to inform students, not indoctrinate them to one viewpoint or another. There must be balance in presentation of information and opinions, with a variety of perspectives being represented in a credible and honest fashion. Numerous opportunities should be available for dialogue among students and with the teacher.

Concluding challenges

Those interested in working with peace and nuclear war education need to consider the information described in this Digest and to reflect on the need for careful selection of materials and plans for implementing new curricula. The challenges for peace and nuclear war educators are many. The following are the most basic of these challenges.

1. Those teaching peace and nuclear war education must familiarize themselves with both the content and processes necessary for credibly teaching this information and must take great care in selecting only age-appropriate lessons for their students.
2. The controversial nature of peace and nuclear war education must be recognized, confronted, and honestly addressed.
3. Advocates of peace and nuclear war education need to work diligently, patiently, and cooperatively in bringing about the changes they seek.

RESOURCES

Following is a bibliography of resources, including references in this Digest. Those entries followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and available in microfiche and/or paper copy from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For price information write EDRS, P.O. Box 190, Arlington, VA 22210.

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